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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002162

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2027  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM: POLLS SAY CHAVEZ STILL  
HAS THE EDGE

CARACAS 00002162 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER DANIEL LAWTON  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Local polls have focused on three issues in the lead-up to the December 2 constitutional referendum: likely participation rates, overall support for the referendum, and the popularity of specific reforms. Polls indicate that while Chavez' electoral camp does not necessarily enjoy a majority, high abstention rates are more likely to hurt the opposition than Chavez. Not surprisingly, the most popular reforms are those that relate to government social welfare benefits, while the least popular ones are those that would concentrate more power in the hands of the executive. Pollster Luis Vicente Leon of Datanalisis told Poloffs November 9 that for the first time in eight years the opposition has a technical chance of defeating Chavez at the ballot box. However, he and other pollsters still give Chavez a decided advantage at this moment when factoring in "intention to vote." Leon also noted that while Chavez' approval rating has dipped since the December 2006 election period, the Venezuelan president retains a 60 to 70 percent job approval rating. END SUMMARY.

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Will you vote?  
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¶2. (C) Recent polls indicate that 40 to 64 percent of those polled intend to vote, so high abstention rates will be an important variable in the December 2 elections. According to a Keller Associates poll released November 8, 64 percent of those polled intend to vote. An October Datanalisis poll noted that 46 percent intend to vote, while a September Consultores 21 (C21) poll noted that 40 percent intend to vote. The C21 poll indicates that those who "definitely" plan to vote tend to be pro-BRV sympathizers, while those who plan to abstain would likely vote against the referendum were they to turn out. Datanalisis Director Luis Vicente Leon told Poloffs November 9 that support for Chavez' reform package rises considerably once intention to vote is factored in.

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Yes or No  
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¶3. (C) Recent polling data also indicates that both the "Yes" and "No" campaigns lack a majority. The Keller study

reported that 41 percent of those polled would support the referendum, 35 percent would oppose it, 20 percent were undecided, and 5 percent would not vote. Datanalisis noted that 34 percent would support it, 34 percent would oppose it, and the rest remained undecided or would not vote. Leon of Datanalisis told Poloffs he expected that two-thirds of the undecided would vote "Yes." A poll conducted by Hinterlaces in September noted that 31 percent would support it, 27 percent would oppose, and 26 percent would not vote. Out of the major polling firms, only C21 reported that a majority of those polled would oppose the referendum. According to its study, 30 percent would support it, 55 percent would oppose it, and 15 percent remain undecided.

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Individual Reforms  
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14. (SBU) Not surprisingly, the most popular reforms are those that deal with social welfare benefits. For instance, C21 reported that the most popular reform is the article that guarantees social security for all workers, including those in the informal sector. Among voters who expressed an interest in voting, the most popular reforms include: that Venezuela become a socialist state, social security, and the reduction of the work week from forty-four to thirty-six hours. According to C21 the least popular reforms are those that concentrate more power in the hands of the president. Seventy-seven percent of those polled opposed the creation of an appointed governor for the city of Caracas. Equally unpopular were the proposals dealing with the elimination of presidential term limits, the extension of the presidential term limit, and the re-organization of electoral territories. C21 concluded that the bulk of the referendum would be rejected if each item were voted on individually.

15. (SBU) Likewise, Keller's study indicates strong opposition to those articles that would increase Chavez' power. For

CARACAS 00002162 002.2 OF 002

example, 58 percent of those polled said they would vote against the elimination of presidential term limits, while 69 percent were against reversing the process of decentralization. Unlike the C21 results, the Keller survey noted that those polled were equally split between those who oppose and those who support a reduction of the work week.

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A Technical Chance of Winning  
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16. (C) Datanalisis pollster Leon told Poloffs November 9 that for the first time in eight years, Chavez does not enjoy a clear and insurmountable majority in the polls. He said the opposition has a technical chance of defeating the constitutional referendum, but likened the odds of the "No" vote winning to Zimbabwe beating Brazil in soccer. Leon stated that while Chavez has a coherent message, a national plan, and deliverables, the opposition remains fractured, lacks an alternative vision for the future, and has little to offer Venezuela's poor, who constitute an overwhelming electoral majority. Additionally, Leon pointed out that while Chavez' approval rating has dipped since the December 2006 election period, he still retains a 60 to 70 percent job approval rating. Leon noted that strong abstentionist sentiment within the opposition and the inability of the opposition to mobilize potential voters logistically will lead a sizable percentage of potential reform opponents to stay home December 2.

17. (C) Leon argued the most important group to monitor in the coming weeks is not the opposition but those he referred to as "Social Chavistas." He said this sizable group identifies with the Venezuelan president but does not necessarily agree with the reform package. Leon noted that this sector is not likely to be influenced by opposition parties but could be

persuaded to vote "No" by the student movement, Podemos, and former Defense Minister Baduel. According to Leon, many in this group see the students as "untainted" and respect Podemos because, like them, the party is pro-Chavez but does not agree with the content of the reform package. They also could be influenced by Baduel because he enjoys legitimacy as a former close ally of Chavez, but has chosen to speak out against the referendum.

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Comment  
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18. (C) At this stage, President Chavez, electoral challenge is to frame the December referendum as a vote on his leadership, not the substance of his constitutional reforms. A solid majority of Venezuelan voters continue to express approval for Chavez, on the job performance, despite registering significant levels of concern over specific issues such as crime and unemployment. (Note: Chavez' referendum campaign slogan is "Yes, With Chavez." End Note.) The electoral challenge for reform opponents is to persuade its base that they can beat Chavez at the polls in order to mobilize the sizable number of abstention-minded opponents. They also need to persuade Chavez supporters that they can both vote "No" on Chavez, reform package and still be loyal to the Venezuelan president. (Note: Podemos, referendum campaign slogan is "Chavez, Yes; Reform, No." End Note.) Neither Chavez nor his opponents have achieved an irreversible tipping point as yet. Nevertheless, the likely high rate of abstention appears to give Chavez, well-financed electoral machine a significant and decisive advantage over the disparate and poorly organized reform opponents.

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